
REVIEWS

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Ana Hofman,
Staging Socialist Femininity:
Gender Politics and Folklore
Performance in Serbia, Brill, Leiden
– Boston, 2011, pp. XXI+148¹

In the aim of participating on the market of an increasing number of studies of different disciplines dedicated to the complex history, culture and politics in the Balkans, the “Brill” publishing house initiated the

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“Balkan Studies Library” series in 2010. The first edition of this series is an ethnomusicological monograph study by Ana Hoffman on staging femininity during the Socialist period on the example of amateur folk societies from the villages of south-eastern Serbia. The author dealt with this issue and field research for several years and the book itself is derived from her doctoral dissertation, which she defended at the University of Nova Gorica (Slovenia) in 2007. The publication is particularly significant for ethnomusicologists in Serbia, seeing that it focuses on material that is frequently researched by scholars. However, even though she originates from domestic “schools”, the author’s methodological approach is different from domestic experts.

The book is extremely well laid out and skillfully contrasts the references to the literature, the extracts from public records and the interviews the author conducted with her interlocutors, which seems appropriate to the research concept of investigating the dynamics of cultural policy and its application. With a strong theoretical reliance on gender studies in socialism, in the Introduction Hofman explains that by using a methodology of oral history, she interpreted the personal narratives of the women of a given location and their (post-socialist) views of previous musical activities, shifting the self-interpretational focus away

from the “performer” to “the person who performs”. The author treated their autobiographies as intermediaries between the Socialist public discourses and everyday practice, endeavoring to highlight the instability of long established binary oppositions (official/unofficial, public/private, ideology/practice). Four chapters elaborated the portraits of the singers, the official cultural policy of Yugoslav socialism, the impact of the institutionalization of cultural life on rural music performance and gender policy in Yugoslavia.

The first chapter (“Gender Performance in Southeastern Serbia”) begins with the presentation of previous ethnographic data on the position of women in the patriarchal Serbian rural community until World War II (primarily intended for foreign readers), supplemented with descriptions by the author’s interlocutors. It is well known that besides reflecting gender divisions, music-making also reveals an area for the release of femininity and even the dominance of women over men, and as it was elaborated in previous studies,² the role of women is extremely important in the preservation of vocal tradition. Because of the methodological premises and the descriptions of the specifically “female” music genres and the positive social function of music in the lives of women, the author’s discourse can be perceived as giving a voice to women as a marginalized social group.

The second chapter (“Village Gatherings: The Politics of Representation”) dis-

cussed the mechanisms of the expansion of folklore creativity in socialism. However, although this theme is essential to today’s understanding of the ethnomusicological field materials, it was not previously considered in this manner, this segment represents of the book is its largest contribution, which will be briefly presented here. At the beginning, the author sets a broader cultural and political framework, explaining the importance of folk art in the establishment of the concept of the Yugoslav identity. The term “folk” was a result of the desire for the class equality of all working people, and hence the desire to present multiculturalism on stage. The traditional creativity of the Yugoslav nations and nationalities was treated as a form of entertainment that required an artistic superstructure in order to be functionalized in society, and become an indicator of successful modernization. The most important asset of such a cultural policy was amateur activity for which the State produced a centralized institutional infrastructure, among other things – culture and art societies and folklore competitions. The author pointed out that the cultural policy in “soft” socialism was variable and differently implemented: in keeping with the expansion of industrialization, urbanization and tourism from the end of World War II and, on the other hand the positioning of rural culture as the bearer of state cultural policy, during the 1960s, the path was laid for developing the study of folklore and its consumption and, from today’s perspective, one could add – its sustainability among its real bearers. The 10th Congress of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia in 1974 was stressed as the major turning-point in official cultural policy, when official discourse

² For example: D. Golemović, “Žena kao stožer srpske vokalne tradicije”, *Novi zvuk: Post-strukturalistička nauka o muzici (special edition)*, Belgrade, Muzički Information Centre, 1998, 45–54.

was driven by the intellectual and administrative battle against rising nationalism that was destabilizing the idea of Yugoslavism, while in practice this was occurring primarily in the domain of culture, best illustrated by the ambiguity in the cultural and political life of Yugoslavia. Hofman observed that such a cultural policy continued to exist till the 1990s, when both socialism and nationalism were advocated in official discourse, whereas from the year 2000, folklore lost the support of the State since it was deemed “old-fashioned”.

Hofman then focused on the event known as “Village Gatherings” (founded in 1973) which she examined through public discourse and the personal narratives of the participants (primarily female). Explaining the policy of one particular, competitive folklore festival, the author described the social and economic circumstances in Niš that led to its establishment. This example is quite illustrative in explaining the ambivalence in state policy towards folk culture: even though it was established by the Government of the Socialist Republic of Serbia and formally represented by the Culture and Education Community, its realization depended on the local cultural centres. The author presented in detail the organization and functioning of the competition, using this example to point out how the concepts of modernization and rurality were embodied and fused in the staging of folklore, thus defining “Village Gatherings” as a mediator between these two tendencies. In analyzing the personal narratives, the author came to the conclusion that their memory and reconstructions of the past were shaped by the current economic, political and cultural context, and that the post-socialist reality has an extremely dy-

namic relation towards the Socialist past. In their memories of the “Village Gatherings”, the author’s field associates expressed a nostalgia for those times, for the given cultural product and the societal values that accompanied it, but also for the experience of this event as a venue for “subversive activities” and social interaction at a time when life was hard. The significance of this segment of the book lies in the potential for applying such an interpretation when researching today’s scene of the protagonists of rural music, meaning that the work which takes this discourse further, is expected to provide a more insightful elaboration of the mechanisms of the relations of state cultural policy, folk musicians and folk music.

The third chapter (“Repertoire”) seeks to illuminate the musical component of this postulate, and one can say that the author’s digression from domestic ethnomusicological thought is most visible here. Hofman investigated the rural context in which music exists not as ritual, but as stage music, clearly deviating from the usual qualifications of folklore performed on the stage as being artificial and less valuable. She considered music as a field in which other than Socialist cultural policy, one could read the situation in society, and particularly raised issues on how official (state and academic) structures affected the performance of music.

The chapter on indirect and direct interventions in the repertoire suggests that there was no political influence in folk music, and explains some of the generally accepted ethnomusicological mystifications on research neutrality. It was emphasized that the role of ethnomusicologists in competitions was to advise and arbitrate,

which resulted in adjustments to its performance which would meet their expectations. In her interpretation of the personal narratives of participants in the “Village Gatherings” Hofman concludes that the singing repertoire changed simply by the performers moving away, that it was adapted to the rules of competition, but that for the same reasons it was preserved in folk practice, and even became representative of a given location in the ethnomusicological sense. Performing on stage led to certain structural changes such as the temporal abridgment of the songs, the decline of genre differentiation due to the manner of defining songs according to the poetic text, reductions in the number of performers, standardization of pronunciation, etc. It was expected that the changes in the musical parameters (scale, metrical and rhythmical structure, form, etc.) would be visible. However, the author singled out the mixture of gendered musical attributes as the most significant change in the repertoire. It is obvious that the author focused on the importance of music-making for the performers, that she perceived music as a field in which political, social and personal discourses are interwoven, and that the analysis of the structure itself was not of primary importance for the topic she was researching. Hence, readers should not be surprised at the smaller number of musical examples compared to contributions with larger domestic ethnomusicological studies.

The fourth chapter (“Singing Exclusion”) is a discussion on feminism in Socialist Yugoslavia and its application in the practice of folk singing. The author pointed to the social position of women in rural areas in the post-war transition from a rural

to a modern culture, through the discrepancy between official and personal narratives. Besides changes in the representation of the body, in the author’s opinion, performing on stage produced a series of social changes for women: they were acting in the space reserved for men (shifting from the private to the public domain), gaining a reputation in the community and other benefits as professionals (they became visible). Stressing the specific features of Yugoslav collective feminism in contrast to the Western individual feminism, the author indicated the gap between the official discourse in which women were equated with men, and the personal discourse which indicated otherwise. This chapter, followed by the Conclusion, shows the importance of subjectivity and the possibilities of narrative musical ethnography in researching public practice, cultural policies and the mechanisms of memory.

In establishing a better foundation, the study would certainly benefit from an examination and comparison of the relations of state policy and folk music in the period between the two world wars, and even during World War II, because according to the available historical sources, postwar cultural policy concerning folk music in Serbia did not collide with the earlier policy, despite the changes in state policy and a different approach to its implementation. Undoubtedly, a more detailed discussion about the scientific discourse on folk music in the Socialist period would lead to capital conclusions, given that ethnomusicology in Serbia developed significantly during that particular time (of which there are written traces and living witnesses) and that, in the author’s words this affected the object of the study. Compared with a similar study

that deals with policy and folklore festivals in Croatia, which was definitely referential to the author,³ this book did not focus on a discussion about the public discourses and the ideological position of folk music as much as on elaborating the treatment of individual accounts about a specific political period and the mechanisms of representing a particular identity.

From the list of references Hofman's expertise is evident not only regarding the ethnographic data, but also the current methodological approaches that pose issues regarding the postulates of ethnomusicology, anthropology and sociology, and more closely – fieldwork, cultural policies, and feminism. By also using non-specific material for ethnomusicological studies in Serbia and archival data, she thus documented the State's treatment of folk culture. The book is equipped with a precise and comprehensive index. In the text of the Appendices – which includes a list of villages and interlocutors, "The Constitution of Village Competitions in Serbia", the programs of two villages' performances and a list of the villages that won competitions at the republic level – there are a few transcriptions and graphic presentations (photographs,

maps, tables). The book is equipped with illustrative audio and video examples on a CD, which are not up to standard where technical quality is concerned and, according to domestic expert criteria, do not supplement the contents of the book with vital information.

This book is primarily designed as a study for English-speaking readers oriented to the humanities, who perceive folk creativity and performance in the Balkan countries mainly as a political project. It will undoubtedly be acceptable to its target audience, and will probably be able to prove that cultural policy in Yugoslavia was a distinctive product and mediator between the social community and the State. Shedding light on the fieldwork conducted and archival materials, and the narratives of the interlocutors in a conceptually and methodologically refreshing manner, is the biggest success of Ana Hofman and until the Serbian translation comes out in print, this publication is recommended to all ethnomusicologists in Serbia, as well as those who are interested in cultural policies and folk art in the Socialist period.

Translated by Rastko Jakovljević

³ N. Ceribašić, *Hrvatsko, seljačko, starinsko i domaće: Povijest i etnografija javne prakse narodne glazbe u Hrvatskoj*, Zagreb, Institute for Ethnology And Folklore Studies, 2003.